

Alive and Tricking – John Banville and Paul Auster
Vivo e Enganando – John Banville e Paul Auster

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John Banville's novels could well be described as an antidote to the dispassionate tone of modern prosaism. Banville's writing flaunts a superabundance of lofty adjectives, and while it can't be decried as purple prose, it could at least be described as violently violet. The overblown style during the first few pages can seem discombobulating, but the world is so powerfully drawn and the voice so compelling that the reader has no choice but to stay. Banville's arcane, gothic scenarios are elucidated with idiosyncratic flair.

It's this element of gothic sensibility that finds its spiritual equivalent in Paul Auster's work, notably in *The New York Trilogy* (*City of Glass*, *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room*). *The New York Trilogy* is remarkably similar to Banville's work in its metaphysical conjectures, a keen sense of the passing of time and focus on strange vanishings and peregrinations. In this short essay I intend to prove the proximity of Banville and Auster's vision by pointing out ten parallels in content and form: the blurred lines between being dead and alive, self-disintegration, disconnection from society, the narrator as spy and actor, the precariousness of language, human instinct for survival, the bending of time and space, the use of Gothic tropes, the appearance of reality in fiction, and the power of description. Later, I will point out differences appertaining to style.

One of the biggest resemblances in Auster's and Banville's work centres on how the natural order of existence is subverted. There is an overall impression that events are suffused with elements of Gothic trickery, casting doubt on reality. Their protagonists tend to be lonely souls, so isolated they become unsure whether they're alive or dead and the fact that *Ghosts* is the title of both a novel by Banville and a novella by Auster attests to this. Montgomery in Banville's *Ghosts* states "I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed and that I am leading a posthumous existence" (25) which is mirrored by Quinn in *City of Glass* who feels "as if he had managed to outlive himself, as if he were somehow living a posthumous life" (5).

Banville and Auster are much less interested in plot than in charting the consciousness and condition of the individual. Among those on the verge of self-disintegration is Licht whose sense of disruption is exemplified by strange, violent dreams: "One night when he was on the very brink of sleep something had gone off ... like a pistol being fired inside his skull" (Banville's *Ghosts*, 108). A striking correlation is to be found with Auster's Quinn: "In his dream, which he later forgot, he found himself alone in a room, firing a pistol into a bare white wall." (*City of Glass* 9).

There is an all-pervasive sense of disconnection from wider society in Banville and Auster's characters. In this illusory world, there is a notion of being controlled: "With that fixed grin and those glossy, avid eyes he makes me think of a ventriloquist's dummy" (Banville's *Ghosts* 12) and "Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the

dummy and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise” (*City of Glass* 6).

Although the narrator of Banville’s *Ghosts* is a past murderer whereas the protagonists of *The New York Trilogy* either are or become detectives, each is primarily alone in this world. Languishing in jail appears comparable to the self-incarceration of life as a spy. While *The Untouchable* is the story of a secret agent, it correlates to the mysterious life of the private detective in *The New York Trilogy*. Auster gives the impression that everything he writes is a series of codes to be broken, as demonstrated by Ellen’s need to treat Fanshawe’s “poems as secret messages” (*The Locked Room* 263), adding to the Gothic suspense. Likewise, Cleave admits “I have always been a secret stalker” (*Eclipse* 100), and the fact that he is an actor corresponds to the overarching view that life is a stage. Auster frequently uses this image of the actor. The narrator of *The Locked Room* explains that he has written no more than ‘a prelude’ which is “far from a final curtain call” (235), and Blue wonders if his target, Black, is ‘no more than his stand-in, a fake, an actor without substance’ (Auster’s *Ghosts* 170). Also in Auster’s *Ghosts*, Black wears a mask to conceal his identity, reminiscent of Banville’s references to commedia dell’arte masks and the Harlequin, coupled to Montgomery’s exhortation to “give me the mask any day, I’ll settle for inauthenticity and bad faith” (Banville’s *Ghosts* 198).

Loss of language is a huge theme of Auster’s. In *City of Glass* Quinn’s failure to follow Peter Stillman leads to a mental breakdown leading to an inability to form words: “He felt that his words had been severed from him, that they were now part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower” (*City of Glass* 130). Banville also depicts a similar phenomenon in *Eclipse* where Cleave’s nostalgia for the past is leading him into a comparable sense of dissolution whereby people are speaking “a form of language I did not recognize; I would know the words but could not assemble them into sense” (*Eclipse* 7). It’s this ever-circling self-analysis that infuses these novels and novellas, allied to the quest to understand the essence of what it is to be human. Yet at times, there is a sense of romanticism in both authors when Auster delineates “the golds and feathery persimmons” of the sky (*City of Glass* 118) which correlates to Banville’s “vastnesses of luminous silver and white clouds” (*Ghosts* 39).

In addition to language, identity and time are fluid too, and the dramatis personae of Banville and Auster dream of freeing themselves from quotidian shackles. Cleave ruminates, “To have no past, no foreseeable future, only the steady pulse of a changeless present – how would that feel?” (*Eclipse* 15). Living in the moment appears to be the biggest aspiration. Quinn has always suffered from “the burden of his own consciousness” and it’s only by taking on the identity of Paul Auster that he feels “lighter and freer” (*City of Glass* 50). Time starts to speed up as a result of the bizarreness of the case Quinn finds himself compelled to pursue: “It was strange, he thought, how quickly time passed in the Stillman apartment” (*City of Glass* 36). Cleave talks of “occasions of timeless time” and rhapsodises on their “sweetness” (*Eclipse* 169).

Continuing with the theme of time, Banville and Auster both exhibit a prelapsarian preoccupation. *City of Glass* centres on Peter Stillman’s study of the fall in the Garden of Eden, leading to the “fall of language” (*City of Glass* 47). Montgomery in Banville’s *Ghosts* refers flippantly to how gardening may rehabilitate his soul to the extent that he can come to some understanding of “Eve, the fatal apple, and all the rest of it” (*Ghosts* 97). Characters have a propensity to feel as though they are falling through space. Auster’s narrator has a sense that “even on that first day I had slipped through a hole in the earth” (*The Locked Room* 203). Cleave has a similar impression of his daughter Cass: “She had never really lost it, that fear of falling into the sky” (*Eclipse* 57).

The elision of day into night is a common Gothic motif. Both Montgomery of Banville's *Ghosts* and Quinn in *City of Glass* are roaming around in the early hours of the morning, the former "awake at three o'clock, wandering through the house... Was it the day still going down or the morning coming up?" (Banville's *Ghosts* 10), while the latter's nocturnal wanderings surreally distort his surroundings so that "the periods of dark nevertheless kept gaining on the periods of light" (*City of Glass* 120). No matter though how time and identity may be stripped from a person, both Banville and Auster agree that there is a surviving life-force in every human being, in Auster's case, "the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the beating self" (*City of Glass* 8) and in Banville's case, "That pilot light...that steady flame that nothing will quench" (*Eclipse* 32).

The Gothic trope of the mad, mentally damaged child features largely in the figure of the young man-child, Peter Stillman, in *City of Glass*, and is employed even more frequently by Banville in the figures of Van in *Ghosts*, Cass in *Eclipse* and Freddie in *The Untouchable*. The other Gothic trope utilised by both writers is that of the ancestral ghostly home of Cleave in *Eclipse* and of the narrator in *The Locked Room*.

While it is fascinating to observe these parallels within Banville and Auster, it is worth bearing in mind that these two writers see a futility in over-exploring what is written or seen, which paradoxically contradicts their ceaseless questioning. Banville's narrator in contemplating the image of *Le monde d'or* reflects, "There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance" (*Ghosts* 95). Auster echoes this in: "We always talk about trying to get inside a writer to understand his work better. But when you get right down to it, there's not much to find in there" (*Ghosts* 175). Their point is, however, that interrogation of life is still vital even if it fails to reveal an answer.

Where Banville and Auster really come together is in their postmodern playfulness, shifting the boundaries between reality and fiction. For instance, Banville's *Ghosts* deals with the work of a fictional French painter named Vaublin while Auster writes in *City of Glass* about an elusive seventeenth-century writer named Henry Dark who transpires to be invented by one of Auster's characters, the older Peter Stillman. Both writers have a predilection for showcasing their academic knowledge, adding a liberal sprinkling of quotes and references to great philosophers or writers such as Herodotus, Montaigne, Selkirk, Swift, Defoe (*City of Glass* 33-34) and Zeno, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (*The Untouchable* 24).

It is important also to highlight their supreme descriptive powers. Auster illustrates a perfect understanding of the split personality in this line: "Quinn craved an amoeba's body, wanting to cut himself in half and run off in two directions at once" (*City of Glass* 56). More so than Auster, Banville is a prestidigitator conjuring interlocking scarves of soaring similes from his top hat, and one such simile of brilliant beauty is: "Pensively he buttered a cold piece of toast, lathering on the butter like a painter applying cadmium yellow with a palette knife" (*The Untouchable* 66). Clearly, both writers have observational skills on a par with, if not greater than, the spies and detectives of which they write. It is only through their singular talent and the solitariness of writing that they can tap in so searingly to the gothic loneliness of humanity.

Having mentioned these parallels, Banville and Auster do display differences in style. Banville's depictions are often ornately metaphorical such as this of Sophie in *Ghosts*: "Light is her medium, she moves through it as through some fine, shining fluid, bearing aloft out of the world's reach the precious phial of herself" (7). Auster's use of language is more economic, direct and evocative of the traditional American detective story. As the narrator says himself

in *City of Glass*: “In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant” (8).

The differences are even more acute when it comes to their dialogue. In *Ghosts*, Auster tends to favour a hard-boiled, tough-guy American voice. For example, when Blue is faced by the masked Black, aiming a gun at him, he is still able to quip, “That’s right, I’m the original funny man. You can always count on a lot of laughs when I’m around” (Auster’s *Ghosts* 192). In contrast, Banville’s dialogue can be archaic and self-conscious in its fey playfulness: “‘Oh, come,’ Felix cried, ‘we shall fleet the time carelessly as we did in the golden world – oops!’” (Banville’s *Ghosts* 116).

I’d like to conclude briefly with how my own writing in short stories and plays resonates with the work of Banville and Auster in its depiction of dislocation, the uprootedness of my characters and the search for purpose and belonging in an increasingly fragmented society. The main difference is that I use more humour to undercut the bleakness, but in certain short stories, I employ a pictorial lyricism like Banville; in other more contemporary stories, I take on a more disaffected tone of urban grittiness and aspire, like Auster, to cut straight to the point. I write more dialogue than prose and I write more female characters than either Banville or Auster but we still share a fundamental worldview and a deep, lingering *weltschmerz* wherein our characters battle against a shifting, insecure universe.